Space, Place, and Identities Onscreen

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The "spatial turn" in critical thinking (see, for example, the work of Michel Foucault, David Harvey, and Henri Lefebvre) [1][#N1] has seen increasing attention focused on issues of spatiality in cultural theory. For Foucault, spatial practice is disciplinary; his panopticon [2][#N2] (1991) is a material imagination of the surveilling and controlling nature of modern life. Similarly, Henri Lefebvre contends that social space is hegemonic, reproducing dominant cultural values.

Space and place are themselves contested terms. For example, for Michel de Certeau (1984), space is produced by the activities taking place within it: *"space is a practiced place.* Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers. In the same way, an act of reading is the space produced by the practice of a particular place: a written text, i.e. a place constituted by a system of signs."[3][#N3]

Walking is a resistive "tactic" in the face of modernity's disciplining functionalism. City spaces are semantically generated through the act of walking, "a spatial acting-out of the place" [4][#N4] or what Kim Dovey calls "spatial syntax". [5][#N5] Similarly, Doreen Massey argues that space is constituted out of a combination of social and material space, produced by "an ever-shifting social geometry of power and signification" [6][#N6]. Some theorists erect helpful distinctions between space and place. For Yi-Fu Tuan, place is a cultural construct which gives meaning to physical space; place is space imbued with meaning [7][#N7].

In terms of screen studies, representations of space and place are inevitably shaped by their site of production [8][#N8]. In television studies, for example, Jonathan Bignell connects production space with *mise-en-scène* to argue that "when a programme takes place, important aspects of its signification include how it uses the resources of the place where it was made, and how it represents space and place for the viewer on the space of the screen". [9][#N9] In addition, space and place are key to the global imaginaries by which subjects make sense of the world. Kim Dovey's work draws attention to how much built space is composed out of recognizable signifiers [10][#N10], and Robin Nelson applies the same thinking to the screen, arguing that "As long as realist texts and their popular audiences agree that a set of codes represent external reality, they remain potent". [11][#N11] Bignell and Lacey identify "imagined geographical and political spaces, where the ideological and aesthetic representations of space… intersect to shape the meanings" of screen texts. [12][#N12] Such depictions of space are also key to depictions of identity, both reflecting and shaping national and other identities through onscreen representation – see, for example, the work of Tim Edensor. [13][#N13]

Space is thus clearly a key topic in contemporary screen studies. This collection of papers comes from a 2016 symposium at the University of Brighton, examining the role of production space in constructing narrative place, as well as the intersection of space, place, and identities, in a range of screen texts.

About the Issue

Anthony Faramelli engages with the theme of revolution in his analysis of the uses of space in *Black Panther* (2018). Faramelli discusses how the film's Afrofuturist design fuses traditional African architecture and cinematic conventions of the science-fiction city to create a utopic space, the city of

Wakanda. However, Faramelli critiques this space as being isolationist, patriarchal and hyper-conservative. He also connects the film's use of Oakland, California with the city's real-life revolutionary history of black radicalism, as the birthplace of the Black Panther Party. Faramelli concludes by using Edward Soja's concept of Thirdspace to show how a more fully utopian space could be created within the film.

Alex Fitch also engages with the cinematic city in his analysis of *Dark City* and *The Truman Show* (both 1998). Fitch shows how both films deal with the growing surveillance society at the end of the twentieth century. He applies sociologists of modernity such as Simmel and Benjamin to argue that the films comment on the experience of urban versus suburban living. In this way, both films can be seen as commentaries on the unstable nature of identity and subjectivity in late modernity.

Aris Mousoutzanis's essay on the TV series *Utopia* (2013-14) examines this British science-fiction series through the lens of biopower, how the control of groups of people by outside forces informs the plot of the show. Using the 12-part series as a stepping off point, Mousoutzanis explores the history of biopower as a concept, used to inform practices of ethnic cleansing and the curtailing of human rights when considered by Foucault and other writers.

Utopia is a series that operates both on a local level – in terms of the location of the main characters – and global, with a genocidal threat to humanity. By considering the utopias and dystopias imagined by this series though the space, location and genetic identity of the human body, this essay demonstrates how the concept of biopower allows the viewer to look at the concerns of both individuals and their species as a whole simultaneously in this series.

In his essay on the use of grids and boxes in Cold War themed films and television, Douglas McNaughton considers how this aesthetic device suggests the idea of the cage. Tracing this visual motif to brutalist architecture and urban environments optimized for military use, McNaughton explores how rectangular location design and *mise-en-scène* informs films including *The IPCRESS File* (1965) and *Tinker Tailor Soldier Spy* (2011). Even when removed from their original Cold War associations, such aesthetics are used as shorthand for surveillance in more modern dramas.

In these films and the series *Spooks* (2002-2011) and *The Game* (2014), the essay explores how certain locations, and the framing of locations, has become an evocative chronotope. Using translations of Max Weber's idea of the cage of capitalist society as a starting point, McNaughton considers how cinematic grids and boxes suggest a certain kind of claustrophobic narrative.

In contrast to these more concrete cages, Robert White explores how fluctuations in the legal system provide a different kind of personal incarceration for characters in Palestinian Cinema. Considering Deleuzian notions of "liquid" perception moving between different states, White explores uncertainty in the law and how that applies to personal freedom on screen.

Via ideas of paranoia and surveillance in works by Kafka, the essay considers recent Palestinian films *The Roof* (2006), *The Time That Remains* (2009) and *Port of Memory* (2010) among others, which demonstrate "a loss of freedom unfolding over time and space", via cinematography, soundscapes and visual motifs. White considers the topological aspects of these films, which evoke and distort locations on screen that either provide the hope of freedom or enact draconian forms of captivity.

Christine Singer's article examines representations of street dance among young Black men in the South African documentary *The African Cypher* (2012). Singer connects the frustrating socio-economic situation of the disenfranchised youths in the film to their occupation of space. Street dance offers a liminal site where marginalized youths transform the space into a carnivalesque one, resisting their spatial and social marginalization. However, Singer notes that the spaces are heavily gendered, evoking notions of hegemonic masculinity and excluding female voices. She also argues that the film unconsciously falls into a postcolonial gaze, offering a vision of personal redemption for Black youth, without critiquing the socio-economic inequalities of post-apartheid South Africa.

Michaela Brebenel also considers the interactions between space and power in documentary film, examining artist and activist Joanne Richardson's films about Romania following the fall of

communism. Brebenel argues that Richardson's work interrogates concepts such as transition, fascism, and post-Communism within a nationally specific historical framework. Richardson's films show how Romanian cities become liminal, palimpsestic sites carrying competing political ideologies. In focusing on gender, precarity, and inequality within a specific local context, Brebenel demonstrates how Richardson's films complicate reductive views of historical progress and challenge contemporary neo-conservative and nationalist constructions.

Covering television, cinema, visual art, and virtual digital spaces, this collection of articles offers a range of theoretical approaches and historical and geographical examples. It shows that issues of power and identity are always imbricated in spaces, places and their screen representations. It demonstrates diverse ways in which space, place and identity can be theorized and indicates some possible directions for future research.

By not limiting the genre or type of screen media being examined, beyond a commonality of space and location as their theme, the various authors of this journal edition explore how certain tropes and philosophical positions have emerged across varied screen media in recent years and provide provocations for further research. With themes such as surveillance, paranoia, censorship and collusion emerging as leitmotifs in the media since the start of the new century, we hope these essays will prove intriguing investigations into underexplored aspects of cinema and television, introduce the reader to works previously unknown to them, and provide unfamiliar slants to films orbiting the fringes of popular culture.

Notes

1. Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces", *Diacritics* 16, no.1 (Spring 1986), 22-27; David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity: An Enquiry into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990); Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991) [#N1-ptr1]

2. Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (London: Penguin Books, 1991) [#N2-ptr1]

3. Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (London: University of California, 1984), 117. [#N3-ptr1]

4. Ibid., p.98 [#N4-ptr1]

5. Kim Dovey, *Framing Places: Mediating Power in Built Form* (London: Routledge 1999) [#N5-ptr1]

6. Doreen Massey, *Space, Place and Gender*. (University of Minnesota Press, 1999), p.3 [#N6-ptr1]

7. Yi-Fu Tuan, S*pace and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1977) [#N7-ptr1]

8. For example, Nick Freeman, "See Europe with ITC: Stock Footage and the Construction of Geographical Identity" in eds. Deborah Cartmell, I. Q. Hunter, Heidi Kaye, Imelda Whelehan, *Alien Identities: Exploring Difference in Film and Fiction* (London: Pluto, 1999) 49-65; Iris Kleinecke, "Representations of the Victorian Age: Interior Spaces and the Detail of Domestic Life in Two Adaptations of Galsworthy's *The Forsyte Saga*", *Screen* 47, no.2 (Summer 2006), 139-162 [#N8-ptr1]

9. Jonathan Bignell, "Transatlantic Spaces: Production, Location and Style in 1960s-1970s Action-Adventure TV Series", *Media History* 16, no.1 (February 2010), 53 [#N9-ptr1]

10. Dovey, *op.cit.* [#N10-ptr1]

11. Robin Nelson, *TV Drama in Transition* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press 1997), 107 [#N11-ptr1]

12. Jonathan Bignell and Stephen Lacey, eds., *Popular Television Drama: Critical Perspectives* (Manchester: Manchester University Press 2005), 4 [#N12-ptr1]

13. Tim Edensor, *National Identity, Popular Culture and Everyday Life* (Oxford: Berg, 2002) [#N13-ptr1]